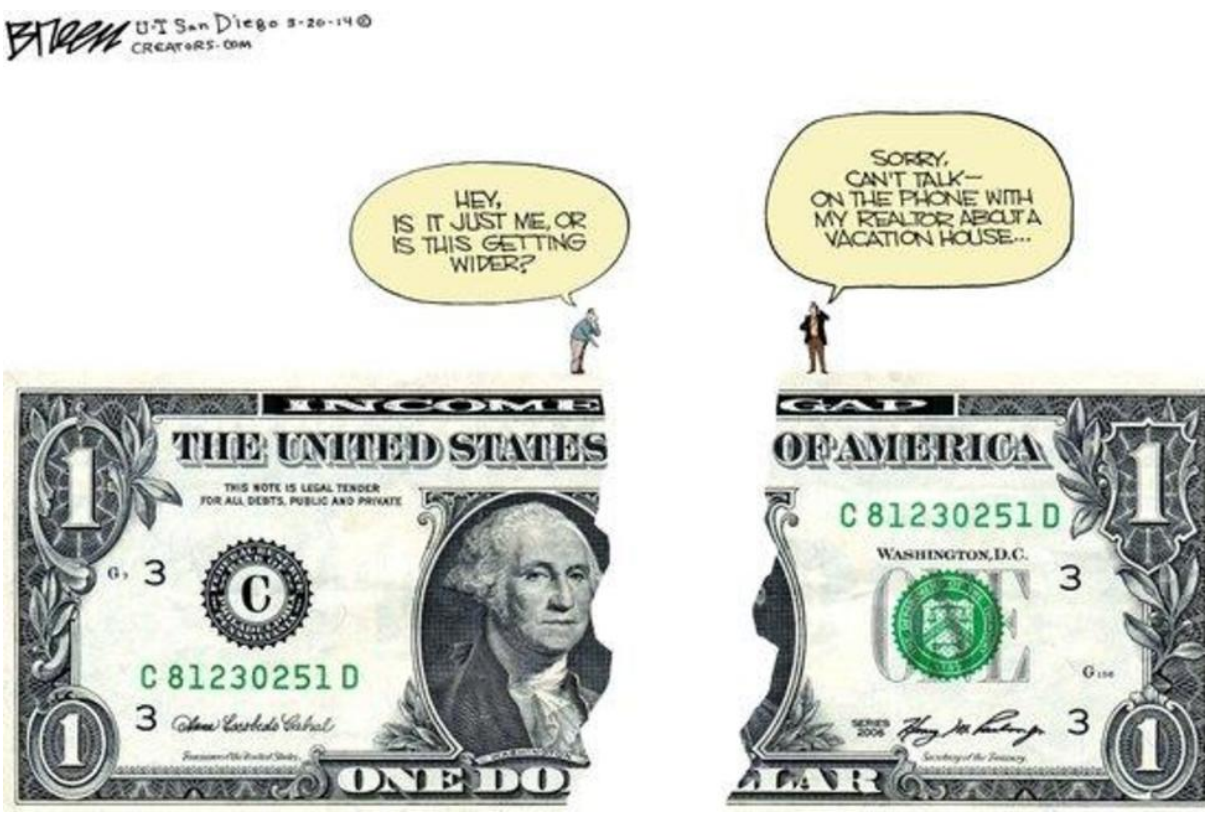
Mobility and Nobility

by Theodore Dalrymple



A few years ago, I was taken to lunch in a grand New York club by some very rich men. They gave me the benefit of their opinion on Britain's rigid class system. They appeared not to notice that, at that very moment, they were being served by a flurry of obsequious men, whose grovelling was certainly the equal of any that I had seen anywhere in the world.

Since my hosts were obviously highly intelligent and cultivated, I concluded that they must have felt uneasy about the notion of class, perhaps even guilty at being themselves so obviously members of an upper class, and quite a rarefied one at that. I have had similar experiences in Australia, another supposedly classless society.

It seemed to me that the embarrassment of my New York interlocutors stemmed from a common confusion between a class society and a closed one. They are not at all the same thing.

Indeed, a classless society, if such a thing were possible, would in a sense be the most closed of all, because in it there could be no social mobility, upward or downward. Everyone would stay exactly where he was because there was nowhere else to go.

This confusion between a class society and a closed one runs through Nancy Isenberg's *White Trash*, which is instinct with totalitarian longing. According to her, America remains what it has been from the very start: a caste society in which social position at birth determines the whole of a person's biography in the way that orthodox Hindus always regard an Untouchable as an Untouchable, no matter his conduct or achievements. Her method and historiography is that of Michel Foucault: she starts with a conclusion and then trawls history for confirmatory evidence, disregarding all other.

Isenberg's totalitarian leanings can be seen in the passage which occurs in the conclusion or summing up of her book:

> *But let us devote more thought to what Henry Wallace wrote in 1936: what would happen, he posed, if one hundred thousand poor children and one hundred thousand rich children were all given the same food, clothing, education, care, and protection? Class lines would likely disappear. This was the only conceivable way to eliminate class, he said—and what he didn't say was that this would require removing children from their homes and raising them in a neutral, equitable environment. A dangerous idea indeed!*

And obviously an attractive one too, at least to Isenberg, a professor of American history at Louisiana State University, for her entire book is a protest against the effects of social class—the evil of evils and the root of all misery. Moreover, the only meaning that can be attached to the words "neutral" and "equitable" in connection with the proposed childhood environment is *identical*. Since no one would admit to wishing

anything *in*equitable, it follows that Isenberg favors, though perhaps she does not quite realize it, hatcheries along the lines of *Brave New World*. Cloning becomes imperative as well, since it can hardly be denied that children differ in their genetic endowment. (No neutral, equitable environment would have turned me into a Mozart or Einstein, for example.) Along the way in her history of, or rather tract on, class in America, she disparages the eugenicists—rightly, in my view. Their transgression, as she sees it, was to evince the immemorial disdain of the American upper classes for the lower. To adapt slightly Shigalyov's famous argument in Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Devils*, Isenberg does not realize that she starts off from absolute opposition to eugenics, and arrives at its absolute enforcement.

The crudity of the author's thinking is evident in her failure to make a distinction between opportunity and equality of opportunity. Again, these are not at all the same thing, and can even be polar opposites: a society that offered no opportunity to anyone would have absolute equality of opportunity. In fact, equality of opportunity, an ideal thoughtlessly espoused even by normally sensible people, is inherently totalitarian: if taken seriously—which it never is—nothing in any child's genetic inheritance or upbringing should be left to chance, but rather equalized, implying some equalizer, omniscient and omnipotent. But that practically everybody should have *some* opportunity, and should have no legal obstacles to advancement, is surely an achievable goal.

Of course, there are disadvantages as well as advantages to a society in which there is opportunity for everyone. The more opportunity a society offers, the more you are faced by your own responsibility for your own fate, which in the great majority of cases will, by definition, be far from the very top of the tree. Without an unfair start in life or injustice to explain failure, you are thrown back on self-examination, which is often more painful and less satisfying than

resentment at injustice suffered.

Isenberg's America is not easily recognizable, though she would argue that this is because its *true* history—that is to say, *White Trash*'s story—has never been told for ideological and political reasons, hidden from view in order to protect the now infamous One Percent's interests. Her America is a land of no social mobility, in which a hereditary upper class (actually caste) ceaselessly appropriates the entire wealth of the country, and an equally hereditary underclass is mired in perpetual poverty, suffering into the bargain the indignity of being despised and blamed for its own predicament.

As a historical schema, this seems sketchy to the point of absurdity. Among other things, it misses a much more interesting, important, or poignant story about the persistence of white rural poverty in America. Successive waves of immigrants to America, arriving with nothing and not even able to speak English, have quickly become prosperous or at any rate unimpoverished. This was a mass phenomenon, not a case of a few isolated individuals. Insofar as hereditary rural white poverty exists, therefore, it cannot be because of the inherently strait-jacketing nature of American society, as Isenberg implies. Her argument could be valid, moreover, only if American society and its economy were of a zero-sum nature, surely an unsustainable point of view even for her.

If the phenomenon of hereditary white rural poverty exists, then, it must be for reasons other than those she gives. Even in societies with supposedly more rigid class systems than America's, for example Britain's, her arguments would not hold. A recent survey found that the richest households in Britain when analyzed by religious affiliation were Jewish and Sikh. These immigrant groups were not always received with joy by the native population, but suffered no legal impediment to advance. Unless Professor Isenberg were to accept the arguments of anti-Semites and racists—that the Jews and Sikhs have somehow achieved their wealth by exploiting or displacing

the previous population—she would have to accept that the seemingly hereditary poverty of the lower classes could not be caused only by the rigid class structure of British society.

In short, there is something in the mentality or culture of the hereditarily impoverished that prevents, or at least inhibits, change. Books like *White Trash*, which argue the necessity, and seem to offer the hope, of a political salvation that somehow always recedes like the mirage of a desert oasis, strengthen what William Blake called "the mind-forg'd manacles" that cause the stagnation. I find it astonishing that a professor of history can seriously claim (on the last page of her long book) that "we have made little progress since James Agee exposed the world of poor sharecroppers in 1941"—but then ye have the corrupters of youth with you always.

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Of a diametrically opposed view is J.D. Vance's memoir of growing up hillbilly and escaping his environment to the sunny uplands of Silicon Valley. Isenberg would no doubt dismiss *Hillbilly Elegy* as merely anecdotal, the story of how one man left thousands behind, and therefore of no wider implication. But it is far more than that: the story of how a man from a disadvantaged background—except in one very important respect—managed to climb up the social ladder without pushing anyone else off, albeit while retaining certain psychological scars caused by his childhood environment.

Vance's Appalachian family was a highly dysfunctional one, though its dysfunctions were certainly not unique to Appalachia, for they were of precisely the kind that I witnessed among my patients in the slums of a once-industrial city in England. There is clearly a dialectical relationship between the behavioral traits and the social stagnation of families such as his. That said, it is equally clear that whichever came first, the traits or the stagnation, there can

be no progress unless the behavior changes: for no one can take advantage of any opportunities absent self-discipline.

It is not as though Vance's family was denied the chance of self-improvement. His mother, for example, was a nurse, but she always preferred the drama of dysfunction—drugs and bad boyfriends—to the disciplinary requirements of a nursing career. And while she loved her son, she seemed to have no very clear idea of the duties of a mother nor the determination to carry them out.

In my medical practice I was consulted by many women like Vance's mother, but always found them very puzzling. Try as I might, I never really understood their point of view, at least in the sense of being able to put myself in their place. There was nothing specifically hillbilly in their moral pathology. They were not lacking intelligence, at least in the I.Q. sense of the word, but were completely, and one might almost say militantly, deficient in the everyday competence required to lead an orderly life. Their decisions defied common sense and predictably led to disaster, which they seemed to court with avidity, as if future disaster justified past disaster. The welfare system permitted them to live their chaotic existence, but I was far from certain that if its support were withdrawn their conduct would improve. Its effect was more indirect and more ingrained: it had normalized such a way of life over generations, making it almost a career choice. Together with objective economic circumstances beyond any individual's control, welfare served to sever the relationship in their minds between conduct and outcome. All that was left to them was the soap opera of their own lives which they could make interesting only by a procession of sordid incidents.

The world in which Vance grew up was one in which the avoidance of shame played the part of morality, which meant that relations between people were largely those of tribal loyalty and power. Consequently, restraint and common decency were taken as signs of weakness. He could easily have been

sucked wholly into this gang-like society, and if he had been, his intelligence would have made him a dangerous man, with quite likely a life sentence in front of him. The devil makes work for idle intelligence to do. Vance was saved by a grandmother to whose care, thanks to his mother's insouciance, he was entrusted early in his adolescence. Though far from an epitome of bourgeois respectability or propriety, she believed that Vance could do, and indeed was obliged to do, whatever he was capable of. Thus free of self-fulfilling hillbilly fatalism, she tolerated no easy excuses for bad performance at school that a less demanding guardian might have accepted. In refusing to do so, she saved her grandson. She did not accept the view commonly held by the people around her that effort was futile because the world's cards were so stacked against people like Vance.

After high school Vance joined the Marines, and because of his native intelligence became a press spokesman for them. His four years in the Marines widened his perspectives enormously: he was no longer enclosed in the nutshell of his hillbilly environment. From the Marines he went to Ohio State University, and from there to Yale Law School. In some of the most poignant pages in his book, he describes how he has had to learn the etiquette of formal dining in order to feel at ease with his new peers: an education that Professor Isenberg would no doubt deride, in large part because which knife and fork to use is probably something that she never had consciously to learn. There is no snob like an egalitarian.

The wider meaning of Vance's ascent from very low to high social status (in only a few years) will long be a matter for debate. Does it prove that it is the "mind-forg'd manacles" that hold people back and condemn them to a wretched existence, or is his case so exceptional that it proves nothing at all? He was extremely fortunate that he had a grandmother so different from his mother. But in principle there is no reason why everyone else in his youthful

environment could not have done what he did.

It might be said, of course, that not *everyone* can go to Yale Law School (*thank God*, one might add). But it is not a question of Yale or jail. Gradations of success are innumerable and every way of earning a living that is of service to others is honorable. Part of the problem, I surmise, is that we have been infected with the idea that only the highest achievement—either in academic status, monetary reward, or public fame—is worthy of respect, and all else counts as failure. From that premise it follows that there is no point in making a vast effort only to be a quiet, respectable, useful, God-fearing failure. It is precisely the absence of this impatient, immature, all-or-nothing attitude to ambition that accounts for the success of Asian immigrants. Whether *Hillbilly Elegy* will reinforce or counteract this attitude is an open question.

First published in the